DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 336 PS 014 894

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TITLE Talking to Infants and Toddlers. Unit for Child Studies Selected Papers Number 32.
INSTITUTION New South Wales Univ., Kensington (Australia). School of Education.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 12p.; For related documents, see PS 014 893. Paper based on seminar presented at Unit for Child Studies (Kensington, Australia, May 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; Infants; *Language Acquisition; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Role; Resource Materials; Theories; Toddlers; *Verbal Communication; *Verbal Development
IDENTIFIERS Conversation

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief outline of some of the constituents of speech, language, and universal stages of the development of talking in children up to the age of 2 1/2 years. Mention is made of theories put forward to account for universal aspects of speech and language development; recent research into the way adults talk to very small children is discussed. Additionally, suggestions are made on how to encourage and promote speech development in babies and toddlers. Suggestions are given for stimulating the speech of children at three stages of language development: pre-speech, first words, and first sentences. The last section of the paper lists books, pamphlets, and tapes considered useful in encouraging talking behavior. (RH)

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Selected Papers

Unit for Child Studies

Number 32

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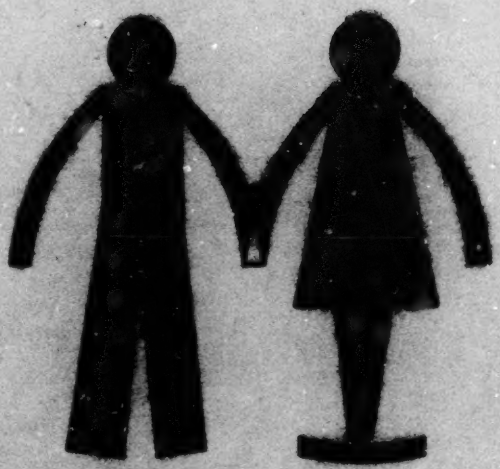

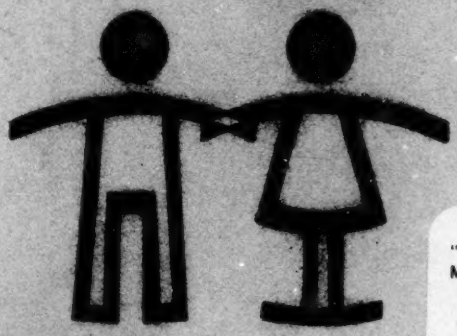

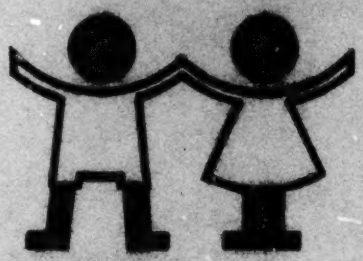

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TALKING TO INFANTS AND TODDLERS

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ISBN 0725-6884

TALKING TO INFANTS AND TODDLERS

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THE PARRAMATTA HOSPITALS

In this paper I shall discuss the subject of talking to infants and toddlers - children 0 to 2½ years approximately.

Rather than giving a list of "shoulds" and "should nots", I shall outline some of the constituents of speech and language and the universal stages of talking development up to around the age of 2½ years old. I will mention some of the theories put forward to account for speech and language development and discuss the more recent research into the way we talk to very small children.

With this background information in mind, I shall give suggestions on how to encourage and promote a baby's and toddler's talking development.

The last section of the paper lists some of the books, pamphlets and tapes that I have found useful and informative on this particular subject.

Let us first consider some of the skills a child needs to develop in order to be able to communicate verbally. Talking is a code which an infant has to learn to decipher and reproduce. It is a way of conveying thoughts, ideas, information and feelings to one another. In order to better understand how an infant learns this code, it is useful to take a closer look at the constituents of a "conversation".

There is the process of translating the original thought, idea or feeling into a word or series of words. This is called "expressive language".

There is the knowing of words and their meaning. This is called "vocabulary" and "semantics".

There are the actual co-ordinated muscle movements of the lungs, vocal cords, soft palate, tongue and lips to produce speech sounds. This is called "articulation".

We speak with rhythm and inflection in our voice to emphasise the meaning and the mood of our message. This is known as "prosody".

When we speak we assume that the other person is listening and understanding, i.e. that they have "got the idea" which is conveyed in those words. This is called "receptive language" or "comprehension".

Lastly, knowing when to speak and when to listen is a basic skill underlying conversation. So is matching our use of language to the situation. For example, the way I speak to a 2 year old is different to the way I address my superior. The way I talk to a toddler when I am cross is different to when I am comforting them. The name for this area of language learning is "pragmatics".

When a child is learning to talk then, it is much more than simply learning to articulate sounds clearly. A baby who is beginning to listen and look and make noises is laying the foundations for future speech and language development. Since babies of 4 weeks old can stop and listen to sounds as well as make distinctive cries of hunger, fear and discomfort, we say that talking development begins at birth.

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The developmental stages of talking appear to be universal. All races and cultures pass through the same stages in the same sequence. These stages can be broadly divided into three before the age of 2½ years. The ages given are approximate:

- The pre-speech period 0 - 12 months
- First words (Syncretic speech) 9 - 18 months
- First sentences (Telegraphic) 18 - 30 months

I will go through each stage in a little more detail.

During the pre-speech period, the baby learns to differentiate the human voice from other sounds. They also learn to distinguish their parents' voices from other people's. Sumultaneously they start to produce cooing and gurgling as well as crying noises.

At around six (6) months old, an all important stage of "babbling" begins. Babbling is a repeated sequence of consonant and vowel sounds, e.g. "ba ba ba ba". The beginning of babbling seems to be innate. However, the baby appears to take over conscious control of babbling soon afterwards. They appear to do it for the pleasure of hearing the sounds over and over again. Those babies with a significant hearing loss start to babble but soon stop. They cannot hear themselves and so do not continue to play with the sounds they can produce.

Babies who can hear go on to produce longer, more complex and varied sound sequences. These sequences initially contain all the sounds a human being is capable of producing regardless of their family's native language. However, the non-native sounds soon become less frequent and eventually disappear. Meanwhile, the native speech sounds increase in frequency and become well practised.

This leads on to the first word stage. There is no clear moment dividing a child's babbled sounds from the first real "words". A word is any sound combination which is used consistently by an infant to stand for a person, an object or an idea.

A first word may be peculiar to the child, e.g. "wer-wer" meani[illegible] pick me up Mum", or it may be an attempt to copy the adult word, e.g. "di" [illegible]eaning "drink". Because of the infant's immaturity in articulation, different "words" tend to sound the same, e.g. "di" may stand for "drink", "this" and "Dad" - we have to guess (from the child's tone, behaviour and from the context) at what the child means.

"Di" also can stand for a number of sentences, e.g. "Give me that drink" or "Where's my drink?" or "That is Mummy's drink".

An additional quality of the first word stage is the obvious overgeneralisation. "Daddy" can mean "all people". "Dog" can mean "all four legged animals".

As these single words emerge, the toddler also continues to babble in his/her own particular jargon.

At around eighteen (18) months, the toddler begins to string two "real" words together to make a little sentence: e.g. "That ball", "Car gone?", "Mummy juice". This is the beginning of a grammar which will expand into mature sentences as the child grows. For example: That ball - That a ball - That's a ball. Car gone? - Where car gone? - Where's the car gone? These first sentences are sometimes called "telegraphic" because the little words such as "is" and "the" are left out. They sound like a telegram.

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Once toddlers are able to combine words into short sentences, they are able to express a greater range of meaning and be more precise. They can begin to express feelings and thoughts in socially acceptable ways, i.e. through words. They can begin to ask questions and explore the world indirectly.

Typically, however, two word sentences are still difficult for adults to interpret at times. "Mummy juice" could mean "Mummy's juice" or "Mummy get me some juice". There is still some jargon mixed with these sentences and pronunciation is immature.

Up until now I have only been describing expressive language development. It is something we can all see and hear. However, it is important to remember that understanding precedes expression. When a child does not understand a word or sentence, they are unlikely to use it themselves. Or they will use it but in a different sense to the adult meaning, e.g. "Harold be they name" instead of "Hallowed be thy name"!

Another point to emphasise is that children will only imitate sentences at the level at which they can produce them. A child at the two-word sentence stage will reduce the adult sentence e.g. Adult: "Your car's in the toy box."
Child: "Car box."

There are always exceptions to a rule, however. There are some children who can echo or imitate an adult sentence word for word whilst not understanding and not being able to produce their own sentences. When this constitutes the whole of a child's talking, it indicates a need for specialised intervention from a paediatrician and speech pathologist who can help diagnose the problem and recommend a suitable remediation programme.

After the two-word sentence stage, talking continues to develop through predictable stages. By five years of age most children have mastered the basic rules of grammar. By adolescence they are using complex sentences. As adults, throughout life we expand our vocabulary. However, in this paper I am only going as far as the two-word sentence stage.

I would now like to briefly describe some of the theories that have been put forward to account for two points:

- the relatively rapid acquisition of talking skills
- the apparent universality of the developmental stages.

One theory by Lenneberg (1967), states that we are all born with an ability to find order in our world. Therefore, we learn to talk by listening to people and finding the order or rules that they follow in their speech.

Chomsky (1967) proposed that our nervous system is specifically arranged so as to deal with a language.

McNeill (1970) went still further and said that we are born with an area in the brain programmed to work out the code of any language we hear around us. This is called a Language Acquisition Device or LAD.

All three theories assume that we are born already equipped to learn a language quickly. Which language we learn depends on what we hear spoken around and to us.

A very different theory says that we are not born with any LAD but have to be taught everything. This is done through the infant imitating what he/she hears and the adult then reinforcing the child's attempts.

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There are two major problems with this theory. Adults do not talk in two-word, telegraphic sentences very often, if at all. Children cannot imitate longer, more complex sentences than they can produce themselves. Imitation certainly is important. Children are notorious mimics. However, it is not the whole story.

A third group of theories centres around the idea of "interaction". Children are said to learn through meaningful interactions with important people in their lives. So a child learns to talk through an exchange of sounds, words and sentences with Mum or Dad for example. A parent changes his/her speech to fit in with the child's level of speech development. In turn, the child strives to fit his/her speech to the adult's level. In this way they are able to understand each other and converse in a meaningful way.

Regardless of which theory one prefers, they all assume that in order for a child to develop speech and language skills, they must have plentiful opportunities to use and hear speech. Without an environment of talking a child has no material to work with, nothing to imitate and no-one to verbally interact with.

However, it is very difficult to prove the importance of talking to children from the time of their birth. It is not ethical to deprive human babies of a talking environment in order to see how it affects their development.

There have been studies which have compared infants and toddlers whose parents played and talked with them a lot, with those whose parents talked to them relatively little (Cohen & Beckwith, 1979; Smolak & Weinraub, 1983). The former group were quicker to develop speech and language than the latter. The major problem with these studies, in my opinion, is that when children are unresponsive to parental advances, parents tend to stop "advancing", i.e. stop chatting to the baby. The question is then, why were those infants unresponsive? Are they showing inherent problems? I would guess that many parents do stop talking to "unresponsive" babies, e.g. passive ones and "screamers". However, it is precisely these babies who need the maximum amount of environmental stimulation and help in order to minimise any inherent difficulties.

Parents can learn to be aware of how a baby's lack of response is affecting them. Once aware, then they can at least seek advice on how best to stimulate talking development, and receive reassurance and encouragement for themselves.

To return to the "Interactionist" theory of language development mentioned previously. It has generated numerous studies recently which have looked at the way mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters talk to infants and toddlers. The results confirm that we do indeed have a special way of talking to the very young. Some call it "baby talk". Researchers call it "Motherese" (Kaye, 1980; Stern et al, 1983).

The common characteristics of Motherese are:

- exaggerated inflection in the voice;
- sing-song rhythmical speech;
- a lot of repeated words and phrases;
- simplified, short and complete sentences;
- use of special words, e.g. "potty", "nana";
- the subject of the conversation tends to be restricted to the infant's world.

These features in the adult's speech diminish as the toddler's language matures. Not all people change their language style in all these ways. However, all

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cultures studied so far do show the same characteristics in their "Motherese".

The infant does not even have to be present for us to switch into Motherese. We simply have to pretend we are talking to a baby or toddler and we are likely to change our speech.

Roger Brown (1977), a psychologist, thinks that "baby talk" is actually a result of two things - a desire to be understood by the infant, hence the repetition and simplified sentences, for example, and a desire to express our affection and love to the infant, hence the special "pet" words, the sing-song and word play.

When the two desires are present we use baby-talk which might sound something like this: "Give nana the teddy, honey bun!" "Who's a little hoochycoo? eh? Who's a little hoochycoo?" etc.

It is quite possible to have one desire without the other. Older brothers and sisters often do not feel affection towards a new baby. Their speech to the infant will still show characteristics of wanting to be understood but without the terms of endearment.

It is interesting to note that there is evidence that a high rising inflection in one's voice attracts the attention of two month old babies better than any other inflection pattern (Sullivan & Horowitz, 1983). It promotes looking and listening in the baby. It is, therefore, an excellent attention-getting device and a good way to interact with the very young.

One might ask why people talk to very young infants when they obviously cannot understand what is being said. One suggestion is that the parent is teaching the baby about "turn-taking" (Kaye & Charney, 1981). This is an essential basic skill for a conversation. (Conversation will stop if participants talk at the same time or if one person talks non-stop to the exclusion of anyone else). The parent interprets a baby's pauses *as if* the baby is listening. When the baby starts to vocalise, the parent goes silent *as if* the baby were talking. In this way the basic rule of conversational turn-taking is taught. As the infant builds up listening and comprehension skills so then the parents do truly respond to the toddler's level of understanding by modifying their level of conversation to meet the child's level.

This phenomenon of changing one's speech has been called "Fine Tuning" (Retherford et al,1981). It is thought that we gauge the child's level of understanding both through their responses to our instruction and through their own level of sentence production.

Nevertheless, it is not as simple as I have suggested so far. People have their own styles of talking to adults as well as to children. Some of us talk constantly, others talk sparingly, some are more like teachers, others like playmates, and so on. The only style that seems to be non-productive as regards enhancing children's language development is *constant* directive giving, e.g. "Do this! Don't do that! Give it to me!" etc. (Olsen-Fulero, 1982; McDonald & Pien, 1982). It is not clear why. Perhaps it is because there is little recognition of the child's language level and little encouragement for the child to reply.

A further problem with constant directives is the lack of variety in vocabulary used. It has been found that whilst parents tend to simplify and shorten their sentences, they do not necessarily restrict their vocabulary (Retherford, et al,1981). Whilst toddlers cannot imitate sentences that are longer and more complex than they can produce themselves, they can and will imitate the vocabulary they hear around them. This is especially so if they hear the same word a few times such

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as in rhymes, stories and social conversation. Many people will have experienced a young child unexpectedly producing a word heard perhaps a day or two before in conversation.

Studies in America and Europe have also observed fathers, as opposed to mothers, talking to infants and toddlers (Rondal, 1980; McLaughlin et al, 1983). The conclusions are conflicting. It seems that most fathers use a "Fatherese" and that this has the same characteristics as "Motherese". However, with the slightly older group of children, i.e. 2 years onwards, fathers may be somewhat more demanding than mothers. Fathers use a more diverse vocabulary when addressing the youngster. They ask more questions and want the children to clarify themselves more frequently. Maybe these differences between mother and father are helpful to the toddler in that father acts as a "bridge" between home and the more stringent expectations of the outside community.

Studies of siblings (brothers and sisters) of infants show that they, too, will use a form of motherese (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Wilkinson et al, 1981). Even siblings as young as two years old will modify their own limited repertoire to address the baby. However, siblings are not as good at it as mother or father!

Another area of interest is the bilingual family. It still is not known how children actually acquire the two or three languages spoken in the family. The most likely explanation is that initially, the infant does not discriminate between the two different languages. They assume it is all the one language. Over time they gradually discern between the two. This development appears to be speeded up when the languages are consistently spoken by separate people, e.g. Grandma speaks Italian and Mother speaks English. It also helps when the two languages are *not* mixed up in the one sentence, e.g. as in "Donne moi the keys please". I would also add that if a toddler is having difficulty learning to talk in any language, that the parents concentrate on just one language first. Once one language is well established, then the second one can be introduced.

As a result of all these studies, and of professional experience with language delayed children, a number of programmes have been produced for parents of babies, toddlers and pre-school children. These programmes aim to give practical suggestions on how to stimulate the development of speech and language in children.

I have taken the main ideas and summarised them according to the three developmental stages of pre-speech, first words, and first sentences.

Pre-speech Stage (0 - 12 months)

- Play with your baby
- Talk with your baby
- Encourage others in the home to do likewise
- Use lots of rising inflection in your voice
- Repeat yourself as much as you like
- Use simple, short sentences
- Tell your baby rhymes and songs
- Encourage listening by giving toys which make sounds, e.g. rattle, bell, musical toy
- Talk back to baby's coos, gurgles and babbling
- Copy baby's noises. Make up your own
- Teach turn-taking by talking when baby is quiet and listening when baby makes sounds

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- Good times for "talking" may be: during feeding time
  when bathing
  when going for a walk
  when playing with toys

  You do not need to set aside a special time, simply comment on what you are doing as you go.
- Once baby can sit up on your lap, look at a simple picture book together. They will enjoy the colours, being close to you and hearing your voice.
- Of course, there are times when baby is alone. This gives them a chance to play and make sounds to themselves.

First Words Stage (9 - 18 months)

The same principles as above apply:

- Talk to your toddler as you go about your business
- Keep your sentences short and simple
- Repeat yourself frequently
- Teach rhymes and songs
- Play with them
- Go for walks and talk about what you see
- Look at picture books together (non-tearable plastic, cloth or cardboard books are best for the nerves!)
- Introduce them to other infants and toddlers

At this single word stage, it is also a good idea to:

- Encourage and expand their single word vocabulary by pointing out what things are called. You can ask them to fetch you this, and show you that. Other types of words like "more", "no", "ta", "hello", "bye", "up", "give", "come", "here", "there", "pretty", "hot", can be taught through play and everyday experiences.

- When a toddler says a word, e.g. "ba", repeat it correctly after them:
  e.g., "Yes, *bottle*" or
  "You want your *bottle?*"

- Do *not* expect them to say the word or sentence after you. If they do so spontaneously and you are pleased, then tell them e.g., "That's right. It's a *bottle!*"

- If you have something inportant to convey to the child, then make sure you come down physically to the child's level so they can see your face. Then speak slowly and clearly.

- Since the toddler will be moving on to using two word sentences, use two word sentences yourself where appropriate, e.g. "More drink?" "All gone".

- It also helps to stress the important words in a sentence, e.g. "It's a *lovely day!*" "Give your *shoes* to *Daddy*". "These are *Mummy's glasses*".

First Sentences Stage (18 - 30 months)

Again the same principles of play, talk and participation with your child apply. Other points especially pertinent to this and future stages of sentence making are:

- Repeat what the child says correctly. E.g. Child: "Dog run"
  You: "Yes, the dog's running away."

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- Comment on what the child has said and add to it. e.g.
  Child: "Car crash!"
  You: "Oh dear! It ran into the other car! Here come the police."

- Expand the child's knowledge of the world beyond their immediate environment by reading and looking at books and TV together. Go out to the zoo or the beach or the train station or a park. Talk about it then and afterwards.

- Do use a varied vocabulary

- Join in and encourage play. Children develop their imaginative play more *with* adults joining in than when they play on their own.

- Remember that a toddler can only imitate you to the best of her/his ability. There is no point in insisting they copy a sentence word or word perfectly if they are not ready to do so. e.g. Please DON'T do this:

  You: "It's a truck."
  Child: "Dere tud"
  You: "No, a *truck*"
  Child: "Tud"
  You: "No. Say *TRUCK*"
  Child: "Tud!"

and so on. It is an exercise which leads to frustration, and of then the child refusing to try again. Please DO something like this:

  You: "It's a truck"
  Child: "Dere tud."
  You: "Yes, a *truck*."
  Child: "Tud"
  You: "Truck, yes. It's very big, isn't it?"

After the first sentences, the toddler goes on to develop three, four and five word sentences, gradually adding in the little words and expanding their vocabulary. By the time they reach school at 5 years old or so, they are equipped with an adequate knowledge and use of language to co-operate with the teacher, to learn through words and to begin the important task of learning to translate the spoken language into a written language, i.e. to learn to read and write.

I hope that these suggestions are useful. I am sure that parents and professionals alike can add to these ideas from their own experiences. I would like to emphasise that I have been addressing the subject from the point of view of children developing talking skills normally. When a child is delayed or disordered in talking development it is important to seek the advice of a Speech Pathologist. As you can appreciate, the earlier advice is sought, the better. If parents are at all concerned DO go to a Speech Pathologist, DON'T wait and see.

In this last section I have detailed some of the books, pamphlets, journals and tape/slide shows that I have found useful on the subject of talking to infants and toddlers.

I hope that I have convinced you that it is a very good idea to talk to the youngest of babies and toddlers, and might have stimulated your interest in finding out more about the whole subject of language and speech.

Recommended Materials

Language Development Series (1983)

Pamphlets:	1.	"Talking Begins at Birth"	60 cents
	2.	"First Words"	60 cents
	3.	"Talking in Sentences	60 cents
		Set of 3	$1.50
Wall Poster:			$2.00

Available from the Speech Pathology Department, Westmead Centre, Westmead, 2145.

"Growth of Language" tape/slide show

Available for loan or purchase ($90.00) from the Speech Pathology Department, Westmead Centre.

Human Development - The First 2½ Years

Program 7. Language Development (Editor, L. Smith)

This is a film strip with voice over and a manual.
Available for purchase from:

Concept Media
1500 Adams Avenue
COSTA MESA
CALIFORNIA 92626 USA

It is available for loan as a tape/slide show from the Speech Pathology Department of Westmead Centre.

Journal of Child Language

This comes out three times a year in February, June and October. It contains a lot of research on talking to children.

"Talking to Children" (Editors, C.E. Snow & C.A. Ferguson). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

It is an oft-quoted source book on this subject.

Paper based on seminar given at Unit for Child Studies, May 1984.

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